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ABSTRACT

A study investigated why nonstandard "like" is used, how nonstandard "like" is used, and whether the users and hearers of nonstandard "like" view it as standard English. Subjects were 65 students taken from speech classes at Tulsa (Oklahoma) Junior College, Southeast Campus--53 of the students were users of "like," 7 were not users, and 5 were unsure. Subjects were tape recorded in small conversational groups of two to six to obtain samples of their speech, wrote a short narrative about some event which had been discussed, and were administered a survey. Results indicated that: (1) subjects recognized the fact that they were using "like" or "be like" in a nonstandard fashion; (2) 57 of 65 subjects placed a negative connotation on the nonstandard use of "like" or "be like"; (3) when asked why people use nonstandard "like," the majority responded with answers which indicated a deficiency in language usage; and (4) users used either "like" as a focuser, or "be like" as a quotative, but rarely mixed the two forms. Findings suggest that it is the responsibility of the professor, or classroom teacher, to provide a means for students to purge the nonstandard use from their vocabularies and to replace it with other more acceptable words and phrases. (Two appendixes of data, partial transcripts of conversations, and the survey instrument are attached.) (RS)

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I'm LIKE, Fed Up!

Observations on the use of Nonstandard "like"

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I'm LIKE, Fed Up !

From the Beatniks of the fifties and sixties to the Hippies of the seventies and the Valley Girls of the eighties, America has spawned numerous subcultures which have had a language all their own. Catch phrases such as "like wow Man..." and "like cool" became standard fare for generations of youth and have continued to resurface as new generations are exposed to them . Middleton (1975) refers to the use of the intrusive "like" as "a bit of conversational Styrofoam" (p. 169). "Like" used as a filler word has made a reappearance in a new guise. This nonstandard "like" is used intrusively in sentences such as the following:

1. It was "like", really hot yesterday.

As a teacher of those current young adults who use "like" in wonderfully creative ways, I am curious about why nonstandard "like" is used, how nonstandard "like" is used, and whether the users and hearers of nonstandard "like", view it as standard English. This study addresses those questions, and the research which has already been published on the "like" enigma.

Why is nonstandard "like" used as a filler, what motivates the users? Some researchers have studied "like", coupled with a be verb, as an introducer of reported speech or inner monologue, as in example 2.

2. I was like, 'do you really think so'?

(Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang, 1990). Others have studied "like" as a focus and marker of new information (Underhill, 1988), as in example 3.

3. Before the parade started, it was "like", raining.

As for motivation, this researcher sees the nonstandard use of "like" as a manifestation of peer group pressure for accommodation. It may be viewed as such since the large majority of "like" users are teenagers and young adults (Johnstone, 1987), groups whose members readily bend to peer group pressure.

Let us consider the specific use of nonstandard "like". As early as 1982, Butters (in Schourup, 1982) noted the replacement of the go narrative with to be. Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang (1990) report the use of "like" in conjunction with the verb be, as a quotative or introducer of speech. They define a quotative as "any verb or expression which introduces any reported speech, either direct speech or inner monologue" (p. 225). They further state that "be like" has recently replaced go/goes as a quotative (as in example 4), and that go/goes (as in 5), previously replaced say/said (as in 6), as a quotative.

4. He was like, 'get out of my face'.

5. He goes, 'get out of my face'.

6. He said, 'get out of my face'.

Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang (1990) further state that go and "be like" are used more for evaluation and dramatic

effect than "say", which is more neutral. "Be like" also performs discourse functions which go cannot perform. When "go" or "say" are used as quotatives, the quote they introduce is assumed to be close to a statement which was actually uttered. However, not so with "be like", which can introduce a thought, a state of mind, or inner monologue, which was never actually stated. Since "be like" is a versatile quotative, it may be with us for a while (Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang, 1990).

Underhill (1988) views "like" without the be verb as a particle. He states that nonstandard "like" is "neither random nor mindless," but functions as a marker of new information and focus: "...the intrusive 'like' that is entirely ungrammatical in standard English and makes sentences seem disjointed..." (Underhill, p. 234).

Underhill (1988) goes on to explain seven functions of "like" as an intrusion in sentences. First, to introduce new concepts or entities; second, to mark focused information, which may be not only focused, but the newest information; third, to mark the focus in questions, or the point of a question; fourth, to mark the focus or significant information in answers to questions; fifth, as a hedge, especially when combined with rising intonation, particularly in women's speech (Lakoff in Underhill, 1988); sixth, to set off unusual notions, particularly ideas that are not meant to be taken literally; seventh, to set off a stereotyped expression, which is not intended to be taken literally.

Underhill (1988) has carefully identified certain junctions in the sentence where "like" seems to occur on a regular basis: before a noun phrase, before a predicate adjective or adjective phrase, before an adverb, or adverb phrase, before an embedded sentence, that is, a subordinate clause, and before the entire sentence.

No research found to date has mentioned whether "like" or "be like" is used in written discourse. The focus is entirely on spoken discourse. Our premise is that as long as "like" is used as a focuser it will not be found in written discourse. However, it seems plausible that the invasive use of "be like" as a substitute for "go" and "say", may develop a grammatical function as an introducer of inner monologue which is unique enough in spoken narrative, that it may begin to appear in written narrative, and eventually lose the intrusive nature of its being.

An additional research question is whether users of "like" view it as standard English. An attitudinal survey conducted by Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang (1990) revealed that the respondents considered the use of both "go" and "be like" as "stigmatized, ungrammatical, and indicative of casual speech" (p. 223). The researchers do not state whether the survey was conducted among users or non-users of "be like". The survey further revealed that users of "be like" were classified as teenage girls: "vacuous, silly, air-headed, California, and Valley Girl" (p. 224). However, a study conducted primarily with subjects from the northeast U.S.

showed that men use "be like" more than women (Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang, 1990).

Hypotheses

H1: The motivation behind using nonstandard "like" or "be like" is an accommodation within teenage and young adult peer groups, rather than a grammatical necessity.

H2: Users of nonstandard "like" and "be like" will recognize its use as nonstandard English.

H3: Users of nonstandard "like" and "be like" in spoken discourse will not use it in a similar fashion in written discourse.

H4: Use of nonstandard "like" and "be like" will occur only between phrases, and not within phrases, as a quotative or focuser.

Methodology

Subjects

The sample for this study consisted of sixty-five students taken from Speech 1113 classes at Tulsa Junior College, Southeast Campus. Fifty-three of the students were users of "like", seven were not users, and five were unsure. The users and non-users were determined by self report coupled with listening observation by the researcher over a period of time in class. The average age of the students was 22.5 years: While there were a small percentage of non-

traditional students, the majority of the subjects were traditional eighteen year old freshmen taking their general education requirements in a university parallel program. Most were from a moderate to high socio-economic bracket; sixty-one were Caucasian, two were African American, and two were Oriental.

Variables

The nonstandard use of "like" is operationalized as an intrusive particle which appears between phrases, and without which the sentence would still make sense.

The use of "be like" is operationalized as an introducer or quotative for reported conversation or for inner monologue.

Instrumentation

A survey was given the subjects (see Appendix D) to ascertain if, why, and how each student employed "like".

Procedures

The subjects were tape recorded in small conversational groups of two to six to obtain samples of their speech. They were encouraged to discuss events they were involved in, in order to produce narrative, since narrative is where the "like" and "be like" generally occur. They were told that the researcher was collecting data on dialect, in order to mask the purpose of the study and avoid observer's paradox.

While the subjects were talking, the observer took notes about the events being discussed, and which subject

discussed which event. This was done so that each subject could be asked to write a short narrative about the event most familiar to him/her.

After the recording session, each participant wrote a short narrative about some event which he/she had discussed. This resulted in both spoken and written discourse on the same topic by each subject. The writing was done after the speaking so that the subject was not tempted to retell the narrative just as he/she wrote it, as that could have resulted in a stilted, formal style of speaking. We were looking for a natural spoken narrative, as that is where the "like" and "be like" are most likely to occur.

The writing session was followed by a survey (see Appendix D), asking where the subject was born and learned to speak, the age and gender of the subject, the subject's opinion about and use of slang and filler words, and finally, the opinion about and use of "like" and "be like".

Data Analysis

Content Analysis was performed on the spoken and written data for two reasons:

1. To determine where in the sentence "like" occurs,
2. To determine if "like" occurs in written discourse, and if so, where in the sentence.

The tapes were transcribed in order to perform the content analysis, and the writing samples were compared, using the same analysis. The answers to the interviews with the

"like" users were counted and reported as tables, as were the answers on the non-user surveys.

RESULTS

H1, the motivation behind using nonstandard "like" or "be like" is an accommodation within teenage and young adult peer groups, rather than a grammatical necessity, was supported. Of the sixty four answers about why "like" is used, only two stated it was needed as focuser (to emphasize meaning). Nine stated that it was used because of difficulty using words, thirteen stated it was used to be trendy or preppy; a total of 43 of the 64 answers indicate accomodation rather than grammatical necessity. (See Appendix B for a more comprehensive listing).

H2, Users of nonstandard "like" and "be like" will recognize its use as nonstandard English, was supported. Of the sixty five answers to the question, "what do you think of the use of 'like' frequently in sentences"?, fifty seven were negative. Only four could be construed to be support for the use of "like" as standard. Those four answers were the use of "like" is sometimes necessary, it's trendy, and it's good for examples. Four of the answers were no opinion, or "it doesn't bother me." The remaining fifty seven answers to the question were negative: fourteen stating that the use of like was annoying or irritating. Forty five of the negative responses to the use of "like" were from admitted "like" users.

H3, Users of nonstandard "like" and "be like" in spoken

discourse will not use it in a similar fashion in written discourse, was supported. The writing samples from the students who are "like" users revealed only one instance of the nonstandard use of "like" ("I guess if I was giving a speech to LIKE an important audience, that would be pretty embarrassing and I would feel that I had to be perfect."). Even though the writing was on the same topic as the conversation, the writing samples took on a less narrative quality than the spoken discourse, and attained a more journalistic quality.

H4, Use of nonstandard "like" and "be like" will occur only between phrases, and not within phrases, as a quotative or focuser was substantially supported. Of the 34 examples of nonstandard "like" or "be like", in the spoken transcripts, 30 definitely occur between phrases. Of the four others, one occurs within an adjective phrase and three within verb phrases.

DISCUSSION

Qualitative Observations Gleaned From the Study

The user subjects in this study recognized the fact that they were using "like" or "be like" in a nonstandard fashion. By comparing their statement of use to their actual taped narrative, virtually all were accurate. The murky area lay in the five unsure users. My observation of them was that three used "like" infrequently, and that two did not use "like" in a nonstandard fashion. Furthermore, the great majority of subjects, (fifty seven of sixty five) placed a

negative connotation on the nonstandard use of "like" or "be like". Four subjects placed a positive connotation (to be trendy, or out of necessity, or its good for examples), and four gave no opinion on the use of nonstandard "like". This leads the researcher to deduce that subjects are strongly compelled to use nonstandard like, even when faced with a pejorative judgement of its use. The users themselves stated that its use was annoying, irritating, bad, air-headed; the unsure users stated that it was distracting and uneducated. What compels a student to use nonstandard English against these odds?

When asked why people use nonstandard "like", the majority responded with answers which indicated a deficiency in language usage. Thirty four of the sixty five answers could be categorized as language deficiency (see appendix B for definitive list). Eleven admitted to using "like" to be trendy or preppy, but seemed to want to outgrow that accommodation now that they were no longer with their high school peer group. Interestingly, two subjects identified the use of "like" to emphasize meaning (Underhill's focuser). One of those subjects was a user, and one an unsure. The non-users felt the use was out of habit, and to relate one item to another (the standard use). Probably because of the small number of non-user subjects, but possibly because of the lack of insight of the non-users, we may venture to say that those people who use nonstandard "like" know better the motivation behind its use.

A disturbing observation which was not actually tested for, but which kept appearing, and needs more study is the notion that people in their thirties and forties are using the nonstandard "like" and "be like". When questioned informally, they maintained that they were picking it up from their children or their young classmates.

A final observation is that a user uses either "like" as a focuser, or "be like" as a quotative, but rarely mixes the two forms. The users seem to specialize. Those using "be like" as a quotative will use it both to report actual conversation, and to introduce inner monologue, but rarely do those same subjects use "like" as a focuser.

In answer to the original research questions:

Q. Why are nonstandard "like" and "be like" used?

A. Chiefly, because of inability to speak articulately.
Secondarily, to be trendy or preppy.

Q. How are the nonstandard "Like" and "be like" used?

A. "Like" is used as a focuser to introduce new or important information, as in Underhill. "Be like" is used as a quotative to introduce actual reported conversation, or to introduce inner monologue, as in Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang.

Q. Do users of nonstandard "like" and "be like" view it as standard spoken English?

A. No, subjects view it as nonstandard in at least 59 out of 65 cases.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

It seems important to study the use of like in the older population to ascertain if the population beyond their twenties are employing the nonstandard "like" and "be like" in their conversations. If so, are their reasons for doing so different from their younger counterparts? We need a study to watch the written narrative of the nonstandard "like" users to monitor if and when the nonstandard use creeps into written discourse. "Be like" may fill such a need in introducing inner monologue that it will develop a legitimate role in written discourse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

I began this study with a live and let live attitude about the nonstandard use of "like" and "be like". I was an investigator, not a crusader. However, I did not expect to find that the nonstandard use annoyed and irritated its users and non-users as well. I did not expect to find the users stating that they used nonstandard "like" because of their difficulty in using words in conversation. The study has led me to believe that it is the responsibility of the professor, or classroom teacher to provide a means for students to purge the nonstandard use from their vocabularies, and to replace it with other more acceptable words and phrases. I have the ideal platform from which to pursue this campaign, as I am in speech communication. But in the tradition of writing/thinking/speaking across the curriculum, might not any professor be an appropriate guide to the articulate

spoken discourse which I believe our students desire and deserve.

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APPENDIX A

RESULTS OF SURVEY

In response to the question, "what do you think of the use of 'like' frequently in sentences?"
No number indicates a single response.)

USERS	UNSURE USERS	NON-USERS
14 Annoying/Irritating		2 Uneducated 2
2 No opinion	Distracting	4 Dislike it
* Sometimes necessary	Uneducated	Bubbleheaded
* 2 Trendy	Not keeping an	Immature
2 Repetitive	idea flowing	
2 Bad	Annoying	
3 Doesn't fit context		
4 I don't like it		
2 Uneducated		
3 Distracting		
2 Gets old		
* Good for examples		
2 Drives me nuts		
2 Doesn't bother me		
Makes material choppy		
Valley Girl		
Surfers		
Turn off		
Takes away from context		
Not much thought goes into their speaking		
Makes speech sound cheap		
I tune out		
Airhead		* Positive remarks

APPENDIX B

WHY IS 'LIKE' USED

In answer to the question, "Briefly state your opinion about why 'like' might be used as a filler word by some people." (No number indicates a single response.)

USERS

+ 9 Because of difficulty using words

+ 11 To be trendy or preppy

+ 4 Habit

3 To relate something to another person

To emphasize meaning

+ 2 Short quick word that fits nicely

+ 9 Trying to think of what to say

To get audience feedback

5 To relate one item to another

2 To describe something

To connect (words or phrases)

Regional

+ Because some don't know how to make transitions between sentences

To propose an example

Nervousness

UNSURE USERS

To emphasize meaning

To buy time to formulate an idea

+ 2 When one does not want to think of a better way to show an example

To define meaning of a word

NON-USERS

To relate one item to another

+ Habit

+ Not sure of what they want to say

Thinks the listener knows what the speaker wants to say

+ 2 Peer group pressure (trendy)

+ Filler such as 'uh'

+ Identified as an accomodation in Hypothesis 1

APPENDIX C

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPTS OF USERS' TAPES

Terri

Well mine didn't have to do with me but LIKE just recently my Mom caught a disease. She was in the waiting room in a wheelchair, she was LIKE coming in and out of consciousness, didn't really know what was going on. It just freaked me out. She actually died in the emergency room. It was LIKE less than a minute, but she died and then she LIKE came back and I talked to the doctor about it. He had had LIKE 9 patients with that same thing and all of 'em had died. Hers was one of the worst cases he had seen. He had to pump LIKE two gallons of poison out of her stomach. and uh he said when she was in the emergency.. I mean he didn't expect her to live. (asked here if her mother had an after death experience) I talked to her about that and what she said is it's not LIKE...but it was a white light and uh it's bright...just LIKE when you have your eyes closed and are laying out in the sun..and she didn't see God but she felt this really strong presence and she did have a conversation with Him, but not LIKE verbally. But like you might in prayer. . . She told him she wasn't ready to go and she said if it had happened a couple of years ago she might have gone, and she LIKE listed, said I want to do this, I wanna do that and LIKE right after that she had no pulse, no heartbeat, you know, she was dead on the thing, and all of a sudden it just all stabilized, it just all came . . . cause he was doing everything he could to revive her.

Brian

When I broke my arm I went in there. The doctor talked to me like I was some little kid. He said we could do one of two things. Well we have either have surgery or we can do the best we can to push the bone back in place. I was LIKE well I don't have $1,000 now on me or anything. Well can you call your Mom or is there anything you can do. I was LIKE well no.

You got insurance they love you don't they?

Valerie

Yeah, LIKE cause if you don't plan your insurance you gotta LIKE call. It's just the secretary she's has to get all the information before she can LIKE go back and see the doctor.

Terri

My toe almost got cut off when I was little and I was LIKE, it was LIKE they wouldn't do anything until they could get a hold of my mother...It took her LIKE 30 min.

Brian

When I first went in there to get it done, they wouldn't give me no medicine and stuff like that. I was going this is broke, give me something and they're LIKE well it's broke - you need some demerol. So they give me this shot and hand me these papers and sent me out...(he lost the prescription and called back) They're LIKE well ah, she was LIKE punishing me for losing my prescription.

Valerie

We have patients who say they lost their prescription. We have a lot of patients come in LIKE we have this little old man who always comes in drunk. He was LIKE, well I lost my prescription.

Karen

When I was an 18 year old mother it was LIKE well I have a baby and all I have to do is feed the baby and change the baby. She (her daughter) wanted to give the baby up for adoption. We stepped in and said no...and it's LIKE your daughter can live with us. It's better than not having any contact and now it's LIKE, I really personally don't want to raise this child till she's 18.

Kristy

They took my jolly rancher and started tossing it around and I was LIKE 'give it back, give it back'. (she relates being hit on the forehead with the jolly rancher) I ended up having to get three stitches on my eyebrow and my Mom is LIKE 'oh this is going to look real cute on the insurance form'. It didn't really hurt, but I wiped it off and just blood was LIKE on the gym floor and stuff. It was LIKE oh my gosh.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW/SURVEY

Dialect Survey

1. Last four digits of SS #_____

2. Age_____Gender_____

3. Place of birth_____

4. Where did you live while you were learning to speak?

_____

5. Have you ever heard "ok, well", and "you know" used as filler words? _____

6. Have you ever used these phrases as filler words yourself? _____

7. Have you ever heard "like" used as a filler word?_____

8. Do you know anyone who uses "like" as a filler word? _____

9. What do you think of the use of "like" frequently in sentences?_____

10. Briefly state your opinion about why "like" might be used as a filler word by some people.

_____

_____

_____

11. Have you ever used "like" as a filler word yourself?

_____